From: Elizabeth Morra
To: Christy Agner
Subject: Weekly Federal Recap for February 13, 2026
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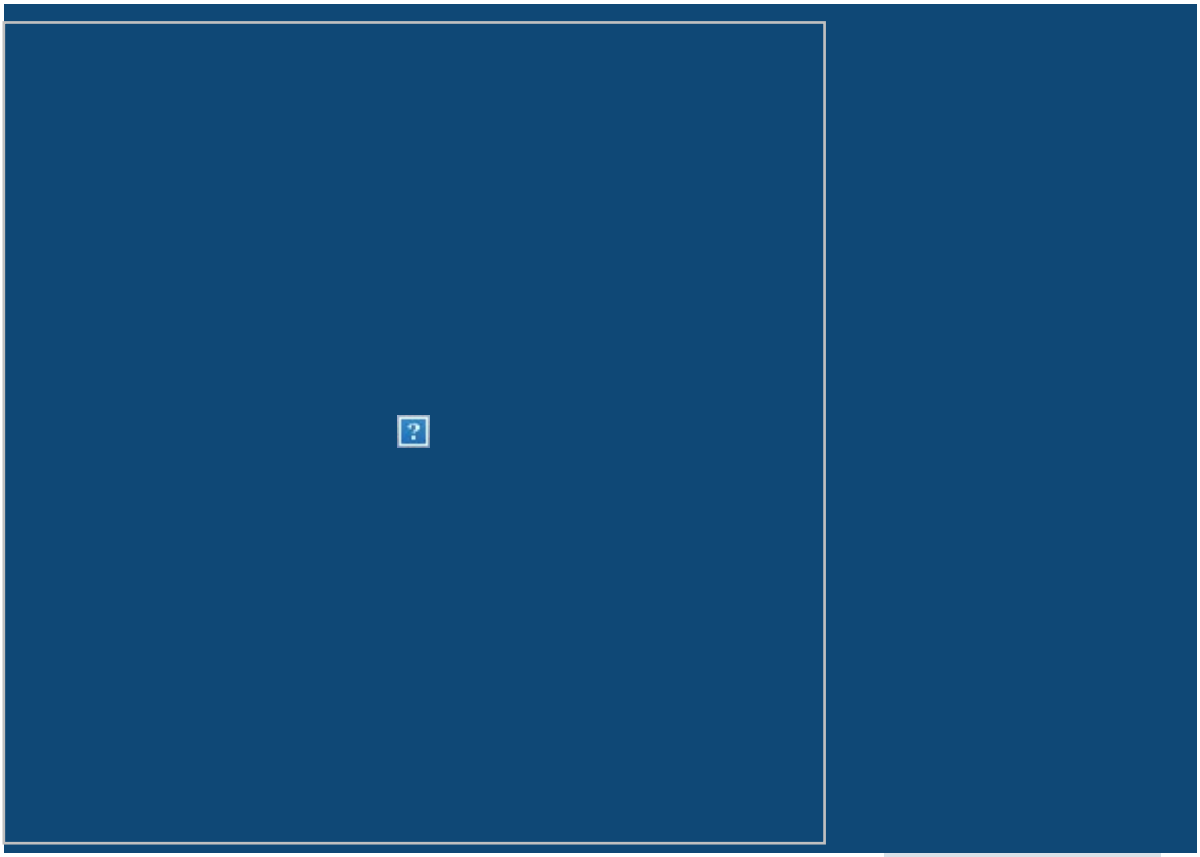


February 13, 2026

Weekly Federal Recap

A weekly update on federal legislative topics impacting higher education.

Congress Battens Down Hatches for Long DHS Shutdown (Courtesy Politico)

- Lawmakers left Washington for a week-long recess yesterday, showing no urgency to avert a shutdown at the Department of Homeland Security that will take effect Saturday morning.
- The overwhelming sense of resignation reflected the reality that neither Republicans nor Democrats saw an obvious path forward to resolving their differences over President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown and whether to rein it in as part of legislation to fund DHS.
- Though negotiations between the White House and Senate Democrats continue, the trajectory of talks suggest DHS funding will be lapsed for at least 10 days — meaning the soonest any resolution would be reached is in the political hothouse around Trump's State of the Union address on Feb. 24.

The lack of progress has even raised the prospect that Trump's speech to Congress might be postponed, and some Democrats are mulling a boycott.
- Negotiations between Democrats and White House officials were ongoing as of Thursday evening.
- Democrats, who have floated a series of guardrails on immigration enforcement agencies in exchange for funding DHS, were expected to formally respond to the latest White House offer over the weekend.
- It will likely take weeks for the public to start feeling pain from a lapse in DHS funding, meaning each side will feel limited political pressure to give in right away.
- TSA screeners are not set to miss paychecks until March, and FEMA coffers are likely full enough to respond to natural disasters for the near future.
- The DHS funding bill was the only FY 26 appropriations bill that didn't get completed last month.
- Congress will soon begin work on the FY 27 appropriations process.

White House Withholds Funding for NASA Research (Courtesy Politico)

- The Office of Management and Budget is withholding money for NASA's science missions, a move that bucks Congress and goes against a funding bill signed into law.
- Officials have directed the space agency to pause work on a host of science missions the White House originally pushed to cancel in its 2026 budget request, according to a letter sent to the agency's centers from NASA headquarters and obtained by POLITICO.
- The letter didn't explain why the administration is holding funds, which are limited to science missions, but Trump has sought to slash federal funds for scientific research and climate-change related activities.
- The missions listed in the letter include key programs that study the Earth, climate-related efforts and programs that study other planets in the universe.
- **What's next:** The "temporary hold" is expected to last for 10 days "but may be extended," according to the letter, which states additional instructions will be provided once it receives formal guidance from OMB on the funding.
- **Key context:** The letter follows an effort from the White House to drastically cut NASA's science missions in its 2026 budget. The budget proposal would have sliced the agency's science portfolio by almost half and canceled several programs already in the works.
- But Senate and House appropriators in the recent minibus bill restored nearly all of the agency's science funding, defying the administration.
- **Lawmaker pushback:** OMB Director Russ Vought is breaking the law by ignoring the NASA funding bill passed by Congress, said Sen. Chris Van Hollen, ranking member of the Commerce, Justice and Science appropriations subcommittee.
- "The time for Vought's hostage-taking is over — he needs to obey the law and release the funds for NASA's critical science missions," Van Hollen said in a statement.

Education Under Secretary Kent Discusses Workforce Pell Implementation (Courtesy AASCU)

- This week, U.S. Under Secretary of Education Nicholas Kent **spoke** at the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) annual conference, where he shared that the U.S. Department of Education (ED) will soon be publishing the Workforce Pell Grant proposed rule for public comment and is on track to launch the new Workforce Pell Grant program on July 1, 2026.
- He noted that Congress did not appropriate additional funds to ED to carry out this program and is unsure of how students will engage with this new program, which makes costing this out a little bit of an imperfect science at the very beginning."
- Under Secretary Kent also addressed interagency agreements (IAAs), noting that ED is transferring some of its functions and operations to the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL). He acknowledged that there have been some "hiccups" along the way, but implied that they have been minor.
- Following Kent's comments, ED officially **submitted** its Workforce Pell Grant regulatory proposal to the Office of Management and Budget on Feb. 10 for review. This review, which typically lasts approximately 30 days but can be shorter or longer, is the last step before a proposed rule on this topic is issued for public comment.

Good News/Bad News on Pell Grants (Courtesy Politico)

- More students are eligible for the Pell Grant, which helps low-income students pay for college, but there's a catch — the program could be at risk of a shortfall.
- There are several reasons why, policy experts tell Politico: There was an expansion of eligibility under the FAFSA Simplification Act of 2021; the form itself is now easier to fill out; and when the economy isn't as strong, people opt into pursuing an education instead of looking for a job.
- About 1.7 million more students were eligible for maximum Pell Grants, which are awarded to low-income students and don't need to be paid back, in the 2025-26 Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA.
- That's a 27% jump compared to the 2023-24 cycle, before the form was simplified, according to an analysis from National College Attainment Network, a nonprofit that helps students prepare for college.
- Congress allocated $10.5 billion in one-time funding last year to address an immediate shortfall in fiscal year 2026. But the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, a nonpartisan nonprofit, estimates that over the next 10 years, there could be a shortfall of at least $61 billion.
- The Congressional Budget Office is expected to publish the latest projections for the program as early as today.

Senate Republicans Leading Fight Against Federal Education Fraud (Courtesy Politico)

- Republican Sens. Tommy Tuberville (Ala.) and Jon Husted (Ohio) are urging the Education Department to continue probing for fraud in federal education programs.
- The pair of senators are co-chairing a recently formed Senate HELP Committee task

force on the subject. The two have asked Education Secretary Linda McMahon for her agency to continue “uncovering, identifying, and preventing fraud.”
- “Our goal is for all Americans to know that money allocated towards funding education will be accounted for and spent wisely,” the lawmakers wrote in a letter. “Taxpayers demand that federal investment in our nation's education is efficient, effective, and transparent. Education is the key to opportunity, and our funding priorities should reflect this.”

U.S. Colleges Report Foreign Gifts and Contracts, as ED Presses Investigations (Courtesy Politico)

- American colleges and universities have so far reported receiving more than $5.2 billion in foreign gifts and contracts last year, the Trump administration disclosed Wednesday as it presses ahead with investigations into four schools’ foreign ties.
- The latest available numbers in the Education Department’s new foreign funding reporting portal now reflect approximately $67.6 billion in total foreign funding that institutions have reported receiving since 1986.
- Additional disclosures filed during the period between Dec. 17 of last year and Jan. 31 will be updated on the portal by the end of February. The department estimates those disclosures will reflect an additional $2 to $3 billion in foreign funding, a senior agency official told reporters Wednesday.
- Between Feb. 28 and Dec. 16, 2025, the department said more than $2 billion in reportable gifts and contracts were disclosed late — in direct violation of statutory requirements, the department said.
- Education Secretary Linda McMahon’s investigations into four universities over concerns about their reporting — Harvard University, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Michigan and the University of California, Berkeley — are ongoing, the department said Wednesday.

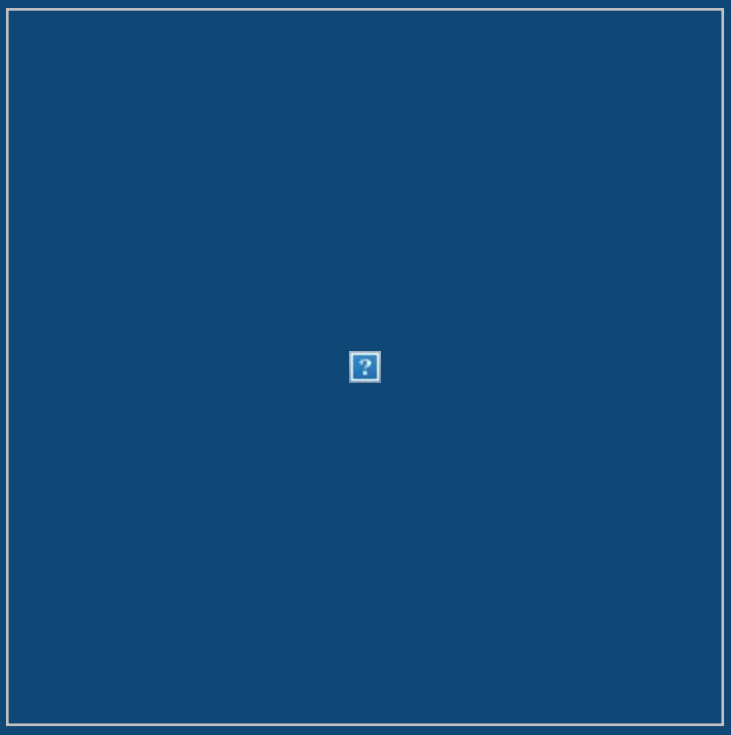
Upcoming Events of Interest

*The House and Senate will stand in recess next week

2026 NHA Annual Meeting & Humanities Advocacy Day
March 8-10, 2026
National Humanities Alliance
Registration Required

This event will provide an opportunity to connect with other humanities advocates from around the country. During the Annual Meeting, the National Humanities Alliance will explore approaches to year-round advocacy on college campuses and in local communities, while also preparing for visits to Capitol Hill. On Humanities Advocacy Day, participants meet with House and Senate offices to make a persuasive case for federal funding for the humanities.

Elizabeth Morra
UNC System Vice President for Federal Relations
eamorra@northcarolina.edu



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UNC System
223 S. West Street
Suite 1800
Raleigh, NC 27603

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